

Wandering Whitman's Urban Past

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"I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine.
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island and bathed in the waters around it.
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me."
From "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

Walt Whitman isn't everyone's favorite poet. The average Sartre-reader at the Hungarian Pastry Shop tends to blow smoke at anything as buoyant as *Leaves of Grass*. T.S. Eliot despised Whitman, and only late in life did Ezra Pound finally reconcile himself, in verse, with the bawdy bard of America.

But NYU Professor Karen Karbiener, who taught a class on Walt Whitman and at Columbia this summer, has some news for those with dark moods and darker cups of coffee--Whitman knew the underbelly of New York City better than most.

"He hung out with opium den people. He befriended prostitutes," Karbiener said, "He was a real shape shifter."

A major part of Karbiener's class is visiting the sites that inspired Whitman's writing. By following his steps, she says, one might catch a glimpse of what makes this shadowy landscape shine.

Manhattan

A typical day for Whitman involved a walk up Fulton Street, from the Manhattan landing of the Brooklyn Ferry to Newspaper Row, the current location of City Hall Park where Whitman scrounged for freelance writing jobs. In his own words, Fulton Street "...is not what may be called the prettiest one in town. Neither is it after the straightest sect of streets. On the contrary, it is rather ugly, and very much crooked."

Despite this description, it's still difficult to imagine how Fulton Street appeared to Whitman--today it hosts upscale department stores and the celebrity-friendly Spa 88. Similarly, the South Street Seaport has been crowded with tourists rather than swarthy seamen ever since trade ships moved to deeper waters along the Hudson.

There are other parts of Manhattan, though, where whispers of the poet can still be heard. Along the esplanade around the World Financial Center Winter Garden, a passage of Whitman's "City of Ships" is built into the fence.

City of the world! (for all races are here;

All the lands of the earth make contributions here;)

City of the sea! city of hurried and glittering tides!

City whose gleeful tides continually rush or recede, whirling in and out, with eddies and foam!

City of wharves and stores! city of tall façades of marble and iron!

Proud and passionate city! mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!

A couple subway stops and a five minute walk away stands a vestige of Whitman's bohemian legacy. On the corner of Bleecker Street and Broadway, one can still see a stairwell that lead to the Pfaff's, a café founded in the style of Paris' hangouts for the intelligentsia. This was a regular haunt of Whitman,

as well as Mark Twain and other literary figures of the time.

Brooklyn

The journey begins at the 2/3 stop on Clark Street. This is Brooklyn Heights, the hub of Whitman's life and one of the most well-preserved parts of New York. Going south on Henry Street brings one to Pierrepont, which leads in one direction to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and in the other to the dark and regal Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity. Perhaps the most well-known of Brooklyn's abundant churches, Whitman lauded its "richness, mellowness, and ripeness," in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

The Promenade at the other end of Pierrepont provides a view of lower Manhattan that could make the stodgiest New Yorker break into free verse. Whitman described this very sight in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

Others will watch the run of the flood-tide.

Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,

Others will see the islands large and small;

Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high...

Northward, the Promenade leads near Poplar Street. Number 64, a house standing alone with paint peeling off the metal siding, doesn't seem like anything special at first. But rumor has it, and the residents concur, that Whitman's father built the house with his own hands.

Just downhill toward the bay is the dock from which the defunct Brooklyn Ferry once departed. Here, too, the words of Whitman are cut into the fence.

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!

Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!

Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!

Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!...

Today, the Ferry has been replaced with New York Water Taxi, and the dock hosts tourism rather than mass transit. But the general consensus is that the poet's specter is inescapable. Even a worker at the Water Taxi station admitted on a recent afternoon, "There's a lot of Whitman around here."